LITERACY: TOOL FOR EMPOWERING WOMEN

"As the saying goes, if you educate a man, you just educate one person. But if you educate a woman, you can educate a whole family," says Andri Isaksson, head of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) liaison office in New York. "It is particularly important to educate women and girls."

According to UN studies, 962.6 million men and women—a quarter of the world's adult population in 1990—cannot read and write. About two thirds of them are women. In 14 countries—10 in Africa and 4 in Asia—the illiteracy rate for women is over 80 per cent. Primary school enrolment for girls is only four fifths that for boys. This situation is threatening to swell the ranks of the adult illiterates of the 21st century.

1990: INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR

The UN General Assembly has proclaimed 1990 International Literacy Year. As the specialized organization entrusted with education issues, UNESCO plays an important role in mobilizing Governments, organizations, communities and individuals to work together towards universal literacy.

To further highlight this issue, the World Conference on Education for All: Meeting Basic Learning Needs, co-sponsored by UNESCO, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Bank, was held in Thailand in March 1990. Attending were 1,425 education specialists from 156 countries, including four Heads of State and 98 Ministers of Education.

Education for women and girls was designated as the top priority of the Conference. A number of programmes for women and girls were designed to reduce the growing disparity of the illiteracy rate between the sexes, and to eliminate the social and cultural barriers that have discouraged women and girls from seeking equal opportunities in all aspects of their lives.

WHY ARE MORE WOMEN ILLITERATE THAN MEN?

Traditional occupations

The crucial obstacle to achieving female literacy is "cultural traditions, for instance traditions according to which girls and women do not need such education," says Isaksson. Traditionally, many women and girls engage in feminine occupations like child-rearing, cooking, cleaning and other domestic tasks. Not only do social perceptions force women to engage in such occupations, but often women themselves think they are best suited to such tasks. Education is at best the second priority or not even considered.

Women in rural areas are overburdened with the manual labour of farming, in addition to domestic chores. Moreover, they give birth frequently, often every two years. A UNESCO study in 1988 showed the illiteracy rate of rural women to be much higher than that of urban women. In Benin, the illiteracy rate of rural women was 92.1 per cent. In comparison, that of urban women was 59 per cent. In Afghanistan, 93.8 per cent of women in rural areas were illiterate versus 56.4 per cent in urban areas.

Constraints caused by heavy domestic duties and the reproductive role of women sap women's time and energy for learning. "When mothers attend classes they often bring their smallest children. Concentration on learning is obviously weakened when babies and toddlers need to be looked after during the lessons," says Agneta Lind of the Swedish International Development Authority.

Traditional attitude

Another obstacle is the negative attitude of men, says Lind. Men may forbid women to go to literacy classes, on the assumption that if women become

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more literate than men, their power within the family or in society might be challenged. Men who are afraid of exposing their ignorance sometimes react violently to women. As a South African woman said, "Husbands don't want their wives to attend literacy classes if they themselves are illiterate. They get cross when supper is late."

Economic recession

There is a striking link between literacy and economic well-being. However, the widening gender disparities in basic literacy, especially in developing countries, have been worsened by economic and political crises. Such crises are likely to result in increased demands on women workers, as well as a lower priority for education among individuals and Governments.

According to a 1990 UNICEF report, in 1989 in many African countries economic recession, debt, natural disasters, migration and armed conflicts undermined social services for women and increased their work-load. In Uganda, one third of mothers pay school fees, which used to be paid by fathers, to educate their children. Educational opportunities for women are left far behind in those countries.

Even in industrialized countries such as Canada and the United States, illiteracy exists. Approximately 6 per cent of adult Canadians and 10 per cent of adult Americans cannot read and write. Thus, they can scarcely cope with the demands of modern society. Needless to say, the situation of women is worse than that of men.

WOMEN'S ILLITERACY IN A BROADER PERSPECTIVE

It is not as simple as basic literacy and numeracy; there is also an all-pervasive functional illiteracy on the part of women in the crucial areas of economic, legal and political literacy.

Economic illiteracy

Despite large contributions and vital responsibilities to the domestic and informal sectors, women have traditionally achieved little in the way of actual economic independence. According to a UN study, in Africa as a whole, women do 60 per cent of all agricultural work. In Tanzania, women work an average of 2,600 hours a year in agriculture, while men work only about 1,800 hours. However, because they are not paid, the *World Economic Survey 1990* says, "their production does not enter the monetary economy. Women's work goes unnoticed in national accounts."

Even in developed countries, the picture is surprisingly similar; for example, women make up almost 40 per cent of today's work-force in the United Kingdom and the United States. Even though women have made dramatic inroads into many previously off-limits occupations, the majority of them often end up in low-paid jobs with little job security and few benefits, the so-called "female-job ghettos". Women receive much less pay than men: 40 per cent less in the United States and 25 per cent less in the United Kingdom. They are promoted less often than men and remain for the most part on the periphery in such "pink collar" jobs as social services, sales, clerical, teaching, nursing and childcare.

Legal illiteracy

Women's right to participate in all forms of social development and women's equality in all spheres of social activities are already enshrined in theory in the constitution or legal guidelines of most countries. In this realm, the UN has played a very active role. The Commission on Human Rights has devoted itself to establishing an international legal framework to serve as a precedent for national legislation: political, civil and economic rights have been focal points.

Events like International Women's Year in 1975, followed by the United Nations Decade for Women (1976-1985), have also helped enormously to increase international awareness of the particular difficulties confronting women. In 1979, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women was

finalized, and has now been ratified by 103 countries as of 1 July 1 1990.

Although this legal framework is in place, many women remain unaware of their rights and do not know *how* to exercise them. Thus, the legacy of subordination and oppression continues.

According to a publication of the UN Department or Public Information, "Although the United Nations Decade for Women stimulated the reform of laws that discriminated against women and the adoption of new ones providing for equal rights and opportunities, the improved situation *de jure* may not be reflected by the *de facto* situation in many countries."

Political Illiteracy

Women are rarely seen in top decision-making positions. According to the *World Economic Survey 1990*, women's participation in parliamentary bodies is very low, except in China, Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, where it is over 25 per cent. The number of female Cabinet ministers is also small except in Bhutan, Norway and Sweden. A UN study indicates that only 3.5 per cent of ministerial posts in 155 countries were held by women in 1987. There were only seven women Heads of State of the 159 UN Member States in 1990. Generally, the percentage of women in high-level government office was inordinately low.

A United Nations study says, "One reason women are not put forward as candidates is that they are not well represented in the leadership of political parties. Data on Western European countries show that, even though most of them have between 20 to 50 per cent female party members, few women become party leaders."

Takako Doi, the first woman to head a party in Japan, says, "In principle, half of the Parliament seats can be held by women, because women make up half of the population. However, male-dominated politics has opposed women's entry." In Japan, the percentage of women in the Parliament is only 4.8 per cent. A single-sex-dominated policy-making process is said to be more efficient, because male politicians can maintain the homogeneity of views, backgrounds and goals. They are reluctant to see their monopoly of power shaken by women. Thus, women remain marginal in high-level politics.

The result of these economic, legal and political practices has been fewer opportunities for women. Moreover, these practices have actually entrenched the existing power structure and strengthened existing gender disparities.

LITERACY AS A TURN-AROUND TOOL FOR EMPOWERING WOMEN

According to the *World Economic Survey*, it is now increasingly clear that expanding women's participation would benefit the development of a country, the welfare of the world and the cause of peace. Literacy is a necessary tool; in fact, it is the first step to empowering women in all their activities, from controlling their own lives to participating on a more equal basis in society, and eventually freeing themselves from economic exploitation.

"The social returns from female literacy are important in terms of women's self-confidence, dignity and productivity," says William H. Draper, Administrator of UNDP. "As mothers, they are the prime educators of their own children and counsellors for other women. We also know that literate mothers have fewer and healthier children. That leads to lower population growth. Being literate, they want their children to be educated. That leads to increased school attendance and lower drop-out rates for girls."

PROGRAMMES IN PROGRESS

A number of programmes are in progress, carried out either by individual Governments or as joint projects between Governments and UN agencies. In Sierra Leone, the project "Literacy and Civic Education for Women", aimed at developing awareness of constitutional rights and duties, is in progress. In this project, 2,000 women will be trained over another three years.

UNESCO is supporting in-service training and research, and is providing educational materials.

The United States is implementing "family literacy" programmes such as "Head Start" and "Even Start". These are successful Federal programmes which involve thousands of children and their parents who are taught simultaneously but separately. Parents learn basic literacy skills as well as parenting skills, while their children receive basic training in reading and writing.

In Thailand, UNESCO and the Thai education authority launched a female literacy programme. Combining literacy learning with lessons in basic job skills, primary health care and housekeeping, the programme has succeeded in raising incomes and making children healthier.

MEDIA AS A VEHICLE FOR LITERACY

The involvement of the media is vital to promote the world-wide literacy projects. For example, radio in Thailand plays an important role. Most of Thailand's populated areas are now covered by the 11 stations of the National Educational Radio Network. Eight hours, allocated to the Ministry of Education, is divided into programmes for primary and secondary school children, courses for adults, and courses for upgrading teaching skills.

The goals of International Literacy Year are also actively supported by such powerful media giants as ABC Television in the United States, BBC Television in the United Kingdom and *Yomiuri Shimbun*, one of Japan's largest newspapers.

The goal set by the Conference on Education for All is to reduce the current world illiteracy rate of 27 per cent to 22 per cent by the year 2000. "In every society, equal educational opportunity shouldn't be just words but reality. This has to be earned by society, by groups and by individuals, who fight for their rights," says Isaksson. "Literate mothers are probably the strongest single factor in the world in solving the problem of illiteracy."

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UN VIDEO ON WOMEN AND LITERACY

Ten UN agencies and departments have co-operated on a project on women and literacy: a half-hour video illustrating projects for women in Africa, Asia, and North and South America. This joint production of UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP, the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the UN Population Fund, the International Labour Organisation, the World Health Organization, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the UN Secretariat's Department of Public Information and Division for the Advancement of Women illustrates how literacy for women has been linked to improvements in health care and family planning, increased economic opportunities and greater civic awareness. The video is available from the contributing agencies and from the Promotion and Distribution Unit (Department of Public Information, United Nations, New York, N.Y. 10017, USA).

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